

The Crucible, Act I: Discussion Questions

1. What purpose does the Overture serve?
2. What does the “spareness” of the Puritan setting reveal about the lives of the townspeople of Salem?
3. What Puritan primary fear is apparent in the philosophy, “In unity still lay the best promise of safety”?
4. Explain the significance of the forest to the Puritans.
5. Explain the irony in the Puritans’ pilgrimage to Salem to escape persecution.
6. To what twentieth century situation is Miller referring when he declares: “They believed, in short, that they held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world. We have inherited this belief, and it has helped and hurt us.” In other words, what ideal is Miller asserting about Americans?
7. When Abigail enters, she is described as “a strikingly beautiful girl...with an endless capacity for dissembling.” What does the phrase an “endless capacity for dissembling” suggest?
8. When Susanna exits, Abigail makes a confession to Parris, which she recants near the end of the Act. What is the confession, and why does she change her mind?
9. Based on his words, what seems to be Parris’s motivation for inadvertently causing the hysteria?
10. What are Putnam’s motivations for his actions in Salem?
11. What role did Ann Putnam play in the dancing in the forest?
12. Explain briefly how Putnam coerces Parris to declare witchcraft.
13. What does Betty’s information about dancing in the forest reveal about Abigail’s true motivation?
14. What does the threat of a “pointy reckoning” reveal about Abigail’s true nature?
15. What does Miller mean by: “A Proctor is always marked for calumny”?
16. Describe Mary Warren’s personality.
17. Contrast Proctor’s verbal excuse about why he has come to Parris’s house with what his actions indicate may be his true motivation for coming.
18. Explain Proctor and Abigail’s relationship.
19. What does Abigail say that leads Parris, Putnam, and Mrs. Putnam to believe Betty is bewitched?
20. Describe Rebecca Nurse physically and by reputation.
21. What three grudges could the Putnam’s have against the Nurses?
22. In Proctor’s argument with Rev. Parris, the theme of authority arises. What are the two points of view?
23. Describe Giles Corey both physically and personally.
24. What is Rebecca’s solution to Betty’s and Ruth’s ailments, and why does this solution anger Ann Putnam?
25. What is Reverend Hale’s motivation?
26. In terms of indirect characterization, why is it significant that Hale recognizes one of the characters by reputation?
27. What question does Giles ask Hale that shows his comical, innocent personality?
28. What effect does Miller create by lowering the curtain for this act during the girls’ cries of witchcraft?
29. What motivates Abby and Betty to begin denouncing everyone?
30. Explain how Miller uses dramatic conventions (direct & indirect characterization, motivation, irony, metonymy, etc.) to establish character and create a basis for the tragedy in his Overture.